

Chapter 1. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Introduction

In the early 1990's, Reclamation embarked on a series of projects to safeguard the levee in the Santo Domingo reach of the Rio Grande which channelized the river corridor and enhanced water conveyance through Tribal Lands. In effect, the removal of river meanders, back waters and side channels promoted a high velocity river (Hiebert 1990). These activities are thought to have impacted the population of Rio Grande silvery minnow (silvery minnow).

The Santo Domingo Tribe-Natural Resources Branch (NRB) proposes to work at four sites along the Rio Grande. Each project will complement prior year habitat restoration projects in the Cochiti Reach. The NRB will be practicing multiple habitat restoration techniques outlined in the "Habitat Restoration Plan for the Middle Rio Grande," (Tetra Tech 2004). All of the proposed restoration projects are aimed at enhancing riverine features to accommodate the needs of the silvery minnow. One project will be the second phase of a project awarded in 2005. This work involves completing the removal of non-native phreatophytes, while the remaining projects will refurbish low-flow side channels and backwater habitats. Each project will incorporate embayments or scallops and other habitat features associated with desirable silvery minnow nursery habitat. Each project is intended to provide and expand suitable habitat for the silvery minnow.

The Project is funded by the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program (Collaborative Program) through the Bureau of Reclamation. This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been conducted to evaluate the impacts of the construction on environmental resources and their relationship to other projects while complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. 4331-4335).

1.2 Proposed Action

The proposed federal action is the funding of various habitat restoration projects on Santo Domingo Tribal Lands by the Collaborative Program through Reclamation. These projects involve removal of non-native phreatophytes and habitat construction that are anticipated to contribute to the enhancement and recovery of silvery minnow and the Southwestern willow flycatcher (flycatcher) in the Middle Rio Grande (MRG). Two projects are located on the west side of the Rio Grande and one is located on the east side, while a remaining project is approximately one half mile north of the Rio Grande and the Rio Galisteo confluence.

The proposed Rio Grande projects include diversifying habitat for the silvery minnow by removing sediment from abandoned side channels to enhance and create embayments and backwaters. This project will complement other restoration efforts taking place on Santo Domingo Tribal Lands, including phreatophyte removal in adjacent tributaries and

placement of large woody debris in the Rio Grande to advance sediment deposition in the Cochiti Reach for the enhancement of silvery minnow habitat.

1.3 Purpose and Need

The purpose of the project, funded by Reclamation, is to implement habitat restoration projects to benefit the silvery minnow and the flycatcher, which is an important goal of the Collaborative Program. Implementation of the Proposed Action would not only benefit the silvery minnow and flycatcher, but also, habitat restoration goals identified by the Santo Domingo Tribe would be achieved.

The need for the Proposed Action is to satisfy federal requirements under the Biological Opinion for Reclamation's Water and River Maintenance Operations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) Flood Control Operations, and Related Non-Federal Actions on the Middle Rio Grande, New Mexico, 2003 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2003). The 2003 Biological Opinion requires the funding and collaborative execution of habitat restoration projects on the Middle Rio Grande that will improve survival of all life stages of the endangered silvery minnow, as specified in RPA element S:

In consultation with the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] Service and appropriate Pueblos and in coordination with parties to the consultation, action agencies shall conduct habitat/ecosystem restoration projects in the Middle Rio Grande to increase backwaters and oxbows, widen the river channel, and/or lower river banks to produce shallow water habitats, overbank flooding, and regeneration stands of willows and cottonwood to benefit the silvery minnow, the flycatcher, or their habitats. Projects should be examined for depletions. It is the Service's understanding that the objective of the action agencies and parties to the consultation is to develop projects that are depletion neutral. By 2013, additional restoration totaling 1,600 acres (648 hectares) will be completed in the action area. In the short term (5 years or less), the emphasis for silvery minnow habitat restoration projects shall be placed on river reaches north of the San Acacia Diversion Dam. Projects should result in the restoration/creation of blocks of habitat 24 hectares (60 acres) or larger [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2003:95–96].

1.4 Relevant Statutes, Regulations, and other Plans

Compliance is required under the provisions of Section 7 of the ESA as administered by the USFWS, and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470) as administered by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). A site visit and review of the project was performed by the USACE to determine if a permit would be required to conduct these restoration activities under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA).